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# Issues in Vendor/Library Relations

## Managing for Productivity

by **Barry Fast** (Academic Book Center)  
and **Judy Webster** (University of Tennessee)



**P**roductivity is essential in both the library and the bookselling environment. Organizing efficient operations should be a goal that libraries and booksellers share. In these days of reduced personnel budgets, where positions are often frozen and staff reductions are common, it is vital to focus on productivity: moving the books through the purchasing and cataloging stream with the least possible time and cost.

Those of us in the commercial world have refined productivity management in order to achieve profits. If we had not, the recession would have eliminated our companies long ago. Only the best run companies and service organizations can prosper during hard times. Library managers are now facing the same tough decisions and difficult work flow problems that commercial organizations have been dealing with for some time.

We believe that there are many parallels in the way book sellers and acquisitions departments can be run. Here are some of our thoughts gleaned from many conversations with librarians and booksellers, and incorporated with some of the practices in our own organizations.

### Management Training

Whether we manage an acquisitions department or a bookselling company, very few of us were ever trained to be managers. Most of us in the library world became managers through pro-

motions, job changing, and just because we were smart and competent in other library positions. Suddenly, we found ourselves in a position that required us to develop a highly productive staff, moving thousands of books, journals, AV materials and other products through our processing units. No one taught us how to do this; we learned by doing, thinking, reading, talking, and making mistakes. Most of us are pretty good at managing acquisitions, but it is rare to find any of us with formal management training. Similarly in commercial organizations most of us became booksellers because we liked books and we enjoyed the environment. If we were to survey the key employees at the major bookselling companies in this country, it is doubtful that more than a handful have had any formal business or management training. We would probably find as many degrees in history and literature among the bookselling leaders as we find among acquisitions librarians.

Fortunately, there are many management training programs available, from one day seminars to intensive week long courses. These are valuable in teaching us how to manage people, how to prioritize tasks, how to make the most of our own time and how to help people be more effective in their jobs. Well-run companies spend a significant amount of money on management training. Well-run libraries do the same. Devoting some financial resources to helping improve managers' effectiveness always pays off.

### Know Your Costs

How much does it cost to buy a book? Most libraries do not know the labor costs of the functions associated with purchasing their materials. Book and journal companies have developed cost accounting models for all aspects of their business, because they must know the real cost of selling their products. Libraries need similar information. By calculating labor costs, and relating them to various purchasing and processing functions, library managers can measure their progress toward maximizing efficiency. By creating a baseline of labor costs per piece of material acquired and cataloged, managers will be able to make better decisions about automation, staffing levels, and the value of different job functions. By recalculating these costs over time, library managers will be able to measure their progress and make a stronger case for the human and automation resources they think are necessary.

At the University of Tennessee Library, we have had a cost study listed in our planning for two years, and as far as I know, we still intend to do one. We just don't seem to be able to have the time to stop and organize the project and get it underway. However, we are planning to hire an outside consultant to do a user needs analysis during the next semester. Many other libraries may be in a similar position. Our "bottom line" is service, not profit, which explains why the user needs analysis has taken priority. Per-

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haps we should also be hiring someone from the outside to do a cost analysis.

### Know Your Priorities

No matter how efficient we think we are, there is almost always unnecessary or redundant work being performed. One of the simplest ways of establishing what need not be done is to ask the people doing the work. The larger the organization, the more likely it is that people are doing things they know are wasteful. You will hear explanations like "but we always did it this way" or "I don't know why I am supposed to do this, but I was told to years ago." This investigating is especially important if you are new to the management position, because it helps you learn about your predecessor's management technique and how it fits with yours. People feel valued if their opinions on particular tasks are solicited, so it is an effective way to gain their cooperation when you make changes. There is a fine balance between what has to be done and what can be sacrificed in times of limited resources.

Another effective management technique successfully used with functional groups is to list all activities performed within the function and rank them in priority order. The process of prioritizing

activities from the essential to the "nice to do, if you have time" focuses the group on tasks that must be accomplished to fulfill their mission within the organization. Library managers must increasingly accept the fact that some previously valued services may have to be eliminated in order to maintain the essential work flow of a unit.

For example, during a severe budget reduction at the University of Tennessee Library recently, we surprised ourselves by eliminating several activities in Acquisitions that we had previously thought to be important. We began fiscal year 1991 with a university-wide reduction in force that affected our department substantially. We were forced to lay off two part-time staff and our student assistant budget was eliminated. The loss equaled approximately 2.5 FTE, so normal coping strategies would simply not make enough difference to be effective. While the acquisitions budget was also reduced substantially, the largest reduction was in periodical subscriptions rather than in firm orders. However, it was the firm order staffing that had undergone the reduction in force. Our group experience in establishing our priorities resulted in some significant changes within the department. We eliminated the pre-searching and entering brief record

activities, and now only enter a record in the online order file at the time we are actually placing the order. Our online system is designed for the management of preliminary ordering activities; we no longer take advantage of those capabilities.

Booksellers are finding that the difficult economic times are having the opposite effect on their services. Competition for the library market has increased significantly, encouraging booksellers to offer more services to librarians in order to maintain their market share. Several booksellers are offering an array of electronic services previously available only in paper form including bibliographic information, invoicing, and management reports.

All organizations, whether profit making or non-profit, should be looking for these balances and evaluating the importance of each aspect of the work load. This process, if it is done with the cooperation of the staff and other managers, can result in improved services at less cost. Whether the "customer" is a library or the community that the library serves, we all share the task of figuring out how we can satisfy that customer while still operating as efficiently as we can. ☛